

SOFTWARE

FAQ

Q Why does HD video editing require such a powerful PC?

A While standard-definition video has a resolution of just 720x576 (414,720) pixels, HD footage has a resolution of at least 1,280x720 (921,600), and up to 1,920x1,080 (2,073,600) pixels. This means applying effects and transitions is much more complicated.

Several other factors make HD footage more complex to deal with. First, the files are a lot larger when uncompressed, so you need more memory and disk space to edit them. Second, if your HD video has been compressed with AVC, which provides better compression than MPEG2, you need a powerful PC to decode it.

Added together, these factors can mean a PC that was fine for editing old standard-definition videos won't manage HD editing. If this is the case, you should consider upgrading your processor and memory.

David Ludlow

Deputy Editor

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MAGIX

Xtreme Photo, Video & Graphic Suite

★★

£119 inc VAT

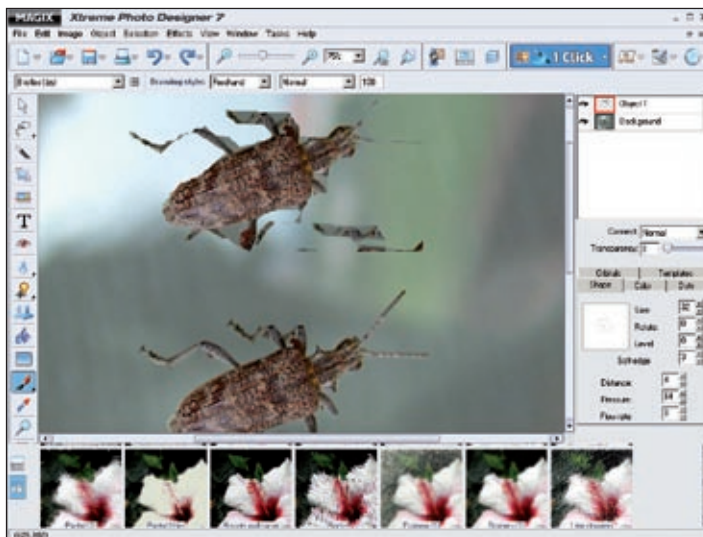
This suite of media-related software from Magix follows its recent acquisition of Xara, a UK-based company best known for its vector-drawing software Xara Xtreme. Magix is clearly rather taken with the word Xtreme, as it has tacked it on to various existing Magix applications. As well as Xara Xtreme, which is now Xtreme Graphic Designer, the suite includes Xtreme Photo Designer for image editing, Xtreme Movies on CD & DVD and Xtreme Photo & Videoshow Deluxe for burning videos and slideshows to optical disc, plus Xtreme Photo & Video Manager.

A launcher program presents various tasks and loads the relevant program in the correct mode. These tasks are organised into five categories – photos, videos, graphics, web design and online services – and include fairly specific projects, such as designing a business card or copying VHS tapes to DVD. However, while the photos and graphics sections include a range of creative projects and simpler tasks, the video section is less ambitious, with no editing options at all. The web design category is misleading, as the suite doesn't include any HTML tools, just a smattering of web graphics tasks. The suite also includes a disc-burning application, although this isn't mentioned on the website or packaging and isn't built into the launcher. Instead, it has its own independent launcher program. The freely available Magix Music Manager is included on the installation DVD, and installed even though we asked it not to.

Xara Xtreme 2 received a five-star review in *Shopper* February 2007. Xtreme Graphic Designer is based on Xara Xtreme 3, a highly capable vector drawing program that's simple enough for new users to use straight away. The screen updates continuously as you adjust settings, making it extremely fast to use.



▲ Xtreme Movies on CD & DVD includes video-editing but can only export to disc and not video file



▲ Xtreme Photo Designer, part of the Magix Xtreme Photo, Video & Graphics Suite, is an awkward image editor that is a struggle to use

SUMMARY

- ✓ Powerful, friendly vector drawing
- ✗ Awkward mixture of tools
- ✗ Poor integration of features

MEDIA-EDITING SUITE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 700MHz processor, 256MB RAM (2GHz, 1GB for HD video), 3GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.magix.co.uk
DETAILS www.magix.co.uk

It can't open Illustrator or CorelDraw files, though, and unlike Xara Xtreme 3, Xtreme Graphic Designer can't export files as PDFs or Flash animations.

Xtreme Graphic Designer can incorporate photos and manipulate them to some extent, but Xtreme Photo Designer 7 is for image editing. It has some powerful features, including blend modes for combining layers in complex ways and a good replica of Photoshop's Liquify tool for freehand warping of images. Its Task Assistant mode makes simple edits easy to perform, but the rest of the software is frustrating, and its layer handling is seriously flawed.

Xtreme Movies on CD & DVD 6 takes video from a wide range of sources and burns it to optical discs. It's reasonably capable but its interface is frustrating. Basic video editing is included, and would be its best feature, except that edited video can only be burnt to disc and not rendered to a video file. Xtreme Photo & Videoshow Deluxe is very similar but handles slideshow creation, and it's baffling that Magix hasn't combined the two into a single application.

Xtreme Photo & Video Manager is a mythical program: its name appears on the splash screen during loading, but the software is actually Photo Manager Deluxe. This has some useful quick fixes for photos, but numerous flaws and a baffling interface make it pretty much useless for organising photo and video files.

Xtreme Photo, Video & Graphic Suite can't seem to decide whether it's for creative or home tasks, and it fails to satisfy either camp. If you want highly capable vector drawing software, Xara Xtreme 3 is available for \$110 (around £54) and adds various key features that are missing from Magix Xtreme Graphic Designer. Photo and video tasks are handled far better by Adobe Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements, which are available together for around £75. Alternatively, Roxio Easy Media Creator 9 Suite (£33 from www.scan.co.uk) isn't as ambitious as Magix's suite, but it's less frustrating and, ultimately, more useful.

Ben Pitt

COREL

Ulead VideoStudio 11 Plus

★★★★

£39 inc VAT

VideoStudio Plus is a home-oriented video-editing application that's packed with features. The most exciting addition is support for AVCHD, a new camera format that records high-definition AVC (MPEG4) video to hard disk, SDHC card or DVDs. It's a welcome feature, but in practice, AVCHD editing in VideoStudio is cumbersome. Footage can be imported only from camcorders or DVDs, so you can't access clips on the PC's hard disk. Importing from a Sony hard disk-based AVCHD camera was confusing, as the option to Import from Mobile Device found the videos but didn't import them. Instead, we had to select Import from DVD followed by Import DVD Folder and browse to the camera's hard disk.

Once imported, playing a single AVCHD stream with no effects was too much for the software on our Core 2 Duo 6600 PC, giving hopelessly disjointed previews. VideoStudio's Smart Proxy function can generate temporary low-resolution files for smooth previews during editing, returning to the originals for full-quality rendering. However, doing so didn't turn VideoStudio into a lightning-fast application,

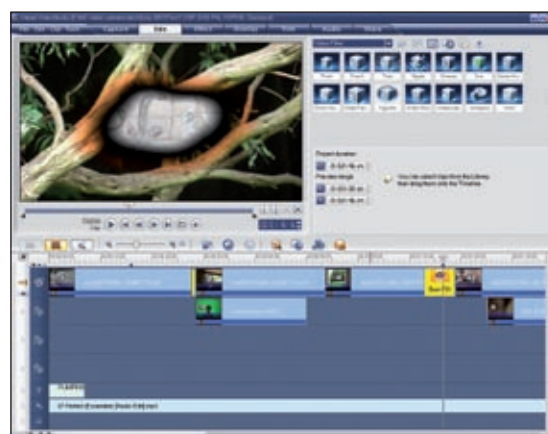
and it still suffered from inexplicable preview problems and delays.

At the other end of the editing chain is HD DVD authoring. HD DVD drives (and players) are expensive but VideoStudio can write its HD DVD data to DVD media. It's a pity the bundled Intervideo WinDVD 8 Silver can't play HD DVD content.

A selection of new effects is designed to fix colour problems. White balance gets rid of colour casts, either automatically by selecting a preset, or with a colour picker tool that lets you define a neutral part of the image. Auto Tone Adjustment is a simple tick-box for improving exposure, and is much more effective than the crude Auto Exposure effect. The DeSnow and DeBlock

effects try to reduce noise and compression artefacts respectively, but both do so at the expense of detail.

Most of the other new features are fairly minor. It's possible to add cue points to the timeline, but you can't easily jump to them. A My Favorites folder in the Transitions list makes the standard Dissolve easier to locate among the mass of



▲ VideoStudio 11's expanded timeline makes better use of 1,280x1,024 displays, and you can now add cue points

transitions. We like the way you can now expand the timeline to view all the active tracks at once, and we're happy to see that chroma keying and transparency are available simultaneously for a clip, a request we made in our review of version 10. However, our bigger criticisms remain unresolved. Previews in effects settings windows are tiny and don't show the results of stacked effects. And why not put effects controls by the preview window, as all other video editors do? We've given up asking for a dedicated button to access effects – bafflingly, the one labelled Effects is for transitions. Many other annoyances make VideoStudio less than pleasurable to use.

VideoStudio has plenty of strengths, but we can't recommend it when its competitors offer more power and precision and much faster operation for just a few pounds more.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ All the features home users need
- ✓ Support for AVCHD cameras
- ✗ Unresponsive and flawed interface

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 512MB RAM (1GB recommended), 1GB disk space. HDV editing requires Pentium 4 3GHz, 1GB RAM (2GB recommended), 16x PCI-E graphics
PRODUCT CODE VS11PLIEPC
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.ulead.co.uk

Also consider...

OPENOFFICE

OpenOffice.org 2.1

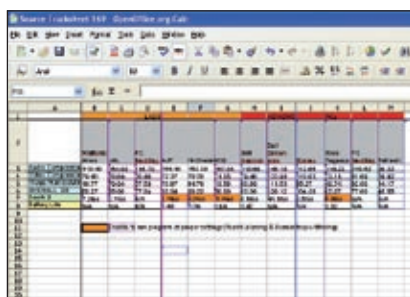
★★★★★

Free

BEST BUY OpenOffice is a completely free office suite, and it's brilliant. It might feel a little old-fashioned next to Microsoft Office's flashy features, but it has a number of excellent applications including the word processor, spreadsheet, database and presentation program. It's an essential piece of software for any PC owner.

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98 or later, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 800MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.openoffice.org
DETAILS www.openoffice.org

✓ Excellent office suite; good document-checking features
 ✗ Macro function kept crashing **FULL REVIEW** Sep 2007



ADOBE

Creative Suite 3 Design Premium

★★★★★

£1,577 inc VAT

BEST BUY Adobe's Creative Suite has quickly become the best bundle of creative software. With its new Design Premium, it's got even better. The bundle includes InDesign, Photoshop Extended, Illustrator, Acrobat Professional, Flash Pro and Dreamweaver – everything you need, whether you're creating work for print or the web.

CREATIVE SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2/Vista, 512MB RAM **PRODUCT CODE** 19500009
SUPPLIER www.pcwb.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk ✓ Excellent value; tight integration between applications **FULL REVIEW** Aug 2007



ACRONIS

True Image 10 Home

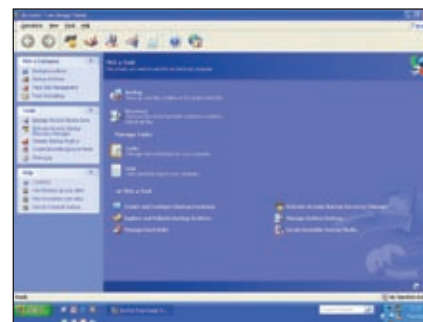
★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY True Image 10 from Acronis makes a complete copy of your PC's hard disk, operating system and all, so you can restore it to a working state easily.

It can make backups of folders and emails and even back up the settings of applications, providing you with everything you need to make sure your data is protected at all times.

IMAGING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 or later, 133MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE AT110 **SUPPLIER** www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.acronis.com ✓ Easy to use ✗ Some features not that useful **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2007



PINNACLE Studio 11 Ultimate

★★★★★

£54 inc VAT

Pinnacle Studio is a friendly, home-oriented video-editing program that would be excellent if it were reliable. Pinnacle has acknowledged past problems and resolved to address them, but so far we have yet to be convinced. However, our first impressions of version 11 were good: installation has been streamlined and the program launches faster. It supports Vista but we tested it using XP Professional.

The standard version, Studio 11, costs £24. Studio 11 Plus (£41) adds support for HDV and AVCHD high-definition formats, lots more effects and keyframe editing to enable effects settings to change over time. The flagship Studio 11 Ultimate (£54) adds 5.1 Dolby Digital encoding, some third-party effects and a green screen – literally, a six-foot square piece of bright-green material to use as a background when filming scenes for chroma keying.

AVCHD editing is new to version 11, but the minimum requirements are very demanding (see right) and even then, transitions may not be previewed without background rendering first. AVCHD previews on our 2.4GHz Core 2 Duo

PC with 1GB RAM and 128MB graphics were hopeless. AVCHD is a challenge for any editing software, but Sony Vegas 7 coped with it on the same PC, and the forthcoming Vegas Movie Studio Platinum 8 promises to do the same. However, Vegas supports Sony but not Panasonic AVCHD cameras, so at least Pinnacle's software supports both brands.

The Ultimate bundle's third-party plug-ins are a mixed bunch. ProDAD Vitascene uses colour correction, diffusion, specular highlights and other tricks to produce an impressive film-look and other effects. It's powerful and highly customisable,

but also resource-hungry, tricky to use and doesn't integrate neatly with Studio. BIAS SoundSoap reduces unwanted sounds from audio tracks but, despite a simple-looking interface, will bewilder casual users. StageTools MovingPicture creates pan and zoom effects, but unlike Studio's built-in Pan And Zoom, it works only with photos.

SUMMARY

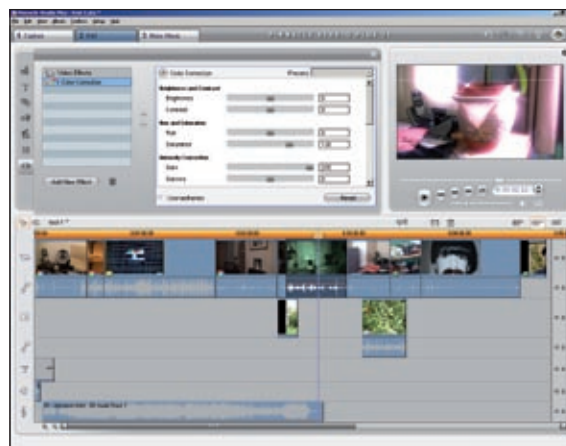
- ✓ Friendly interface
- ✓ More reliable than previous versions
- ✗ Not as good as Adobe's and Sony's tools

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM (2.4GHz, 1GB recommended for XP, required for Vista), 5GB disk space. AVCHD editing requires 2.4GHz Core 2 Duo, 1.5GB RAM (2GB on Vista), 256MB graphics

PART CODE 8202-26248-91

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

DETAILS www.pinnaclesys.com



▲ Pinnacle Studio 11 Ultimate packs a wealth of powerful features into its welcoming interface

Studio's success hangs on its stability. Version 11 isn't trouble-free: automatic background rendering of the Vitascene plug-in hogged so much processing power that even moving the mouse became a struggle, so we had to disable background rendering and put up with poor previews. Crashes were rare, though, and we didn't spot any other problems, which leads us tentatively to conclude that Studio has resolved its reliability issues.

We still prefer Adobe and Sony's low-cost editors, but if a beginner-friendly interface is more important than sophisticated editing tools, Studio 11 finally lives up to its promises. The extra software in the Ultimate version is of questionable value, but the green screen is an inspired extra that's well worth the extra £13.

Ben Pitt

Also consider...

ADOBE Photoshop Lightroom 1.0

★★★★★

£129 inc VAT

BEST BUY Adobe's Lightroom is everything a digital camera enthusiast could want. It helps manage your images, process RAW files, correct colour, retouch and export to a range of media. It's brilliant to use and, although designed for professional photographers, a great choice for anyone with an expensive camera.

PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 768MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 19250102 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk ✓ Powerful photo manipulation
✗ Basic noise reduction and sharpening
FULL REVIEW Jul 2007



ROXIO Easy Media Creator 9 Suite

★★★★★

£33 inc VAT

BEST BUY This suite comes with all the media-editing tools you'll ever need. Its greatest strengths are its tight integration between all the modules and its friendly, task-oriented interface. With capable editing tools, it's great value and the best media suite you can buy, although there's not enough difference to warrant upgrading.

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 227000UK
SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com DETAILS www.scan.co.uk
✓ Excellent media-editing tools ✗ Little reason to upgrade from Creator 8
FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



STEGANOS AntiVirus 2007

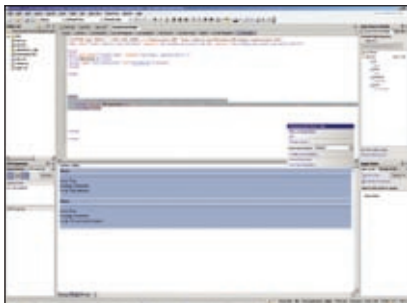
★★★★★

£20 inc VAT

BEST BUY Steganos AntiVirus uses software from Kaspersky, so you get the best anti-virus protection money can buy for a lot less money. In our recent Labs test (*Shopper* April 2007), it beat every other anti-virus application hands down. For Windows Vista, you'll have to buy Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6, as Steganos doesn't currently support Vista.

ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 or later, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.steganos.co.uk DETAILS www.steganos.co.uk
✓ Powerful protection against viruses ✗ Not compatible with Windows Vista
FULL REVIEW Apr 2007





▲ Microsoft's new web design application embraces XHTML and CSS wholeheartedly

MICROSOFT Expression Web

★★★★★

£254 inc VAT

Rather than updating its elderly FrontPage web design software, Microsoft has started again with a new tool. Where FrontPage helped Office users to create websites using a familiar interface, Expression Web is more powerful, pricier and aimed at professional designers.

When FrontPage 2003 was released the idea of using XHTML and CSS to create accessible and widely compatible layouts that separate content from design was relatively new. Today this is a cornerstone of good site design, and we were impressed to see that Expression Web embraces it. The design tools are geared towards using CSS style sheets, and plain HTML pages are generated using XHTML 1.0 Transitional. Like most modern browsers, the design view can render previews using two different rule sets: a strict mode for XHTML pages, and one with quirks for tackling older, messier code. In strict mode its rendering is as impressive as that of Adobe Dreamweaver CS3.

Expression includes other neat features. Control-clicking an element ID in code view takes you to the relevant CSS style, making it easy to tweak the formatting in separate style sheets. Code auto-completion works well, and typing Control-Enter reveals an auto-complete list that lets you quickly enter tedious long strings such as doctype declarations.

It has its limitations, though. We can ignore Microsoft's habit of naming pages with the extension .htm rather than .html, but Expression's support for only ASP.NET scripting, and not PHP, will alienate many professionals. We found creating CSS layouts in design view trickier than when using Dreamweaver, and Expression Web doesn't support Secure FTP.

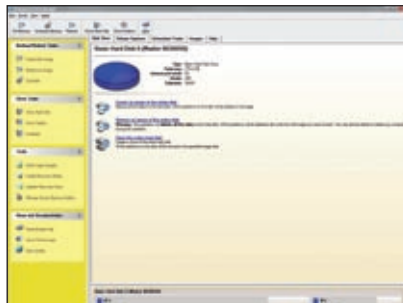
Expression Web is keenly priced, and if you only ever use ASP.NET or XHTML it's great value. For most professionals, though, PHP support and mobile device previews make Dreamweaver CS3 a better bet.

Tom Royal

SUMMARY

- ✓ Built for XHTML and CSS
- ✓ Cheaper than Dreamweaver
- ✗ Doesn't support PHP

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2/ Vista/Server 2003 SP1, 233MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 400MB disk space
PART CODE UCQ-00001
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.microsoft.com



▲ Copy your entire hard disk or just selected files with Perfect Image 11 to avoid PC disaster

AVANQUEST Perfect Image 11

★★★★

£40 inc VAT

Avanquest's Perfect Image 11 makes a complete image of your hard disk, including the operating system, applications and files, so you can restore your entire PC in the event of a serious problem. Creating a one-off image of your hard disk is easy enough, but the more advanced features are a pain.

For starters, the front page of the software lets you schedule only a complete disk image and not differential backups, which save only files that have been modified since the last backup. To perform a differential backup, you select the option from a different menu and follow a different wizard. Sadly, there's no option to make an image automatically when you install software, as with Norton Ghost.

You can restore a partition through the software or create a recovery disc for those times when your PC is too badly damaged even to start Windows. You should do this immediately, as the install CD isn't bootable.

The software has a Works with Windows Vista logo on the front, but we had problems when we tried. The biggest one was that the software crashed when we tried to browse an image to restore a single file. We didn't have this trouble on our Windows XP PC, though.

As well as making a complete backup, you can also back up selected files. This launches a separate application called AutoSave 2.0, which looks dated and isn't very friendly to use. You can schedule backups, and the application also works in the background, keeping multiple versions of files as you save them. This is a good idea, but the program doesn't integrate with Vista's Previous Version, so you're forced to use the dated interface to restore a file.

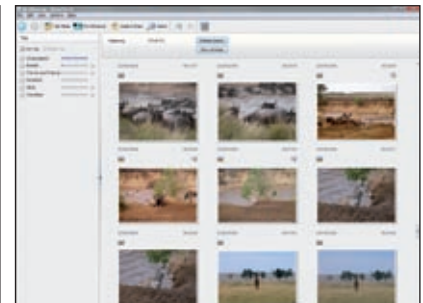
Perfect Image 11 isn't a bad product, but Acronis True Image 10 Home (see *Also Consider...* on page 55) is easier to use, has more comprehensive backup options including Outlook email and is £15 cheaper.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to make one-off backups
- ✗ Poor file backup
- ✗ Crashed on our Vista PC

BACKUP SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/ Vista, 300MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 55MB disk space
PART CODE None
SUPPLIER www.avanquest.co.uk
DETAILS www.avanquest.co.uk



▲ AlbumPlus X2 lets you organise your photos by adding Tags, but then so do its free rivals

SERIF AlbumPlus X2

★★★

£40 inc VAT

Serif's AlbumPlus X2 is designed to help you organise and edit your digital photo collection, but it faces stiff competition from free utilities, including Google's Picasa and Microsoft's Vista Windows Photo Gallery.

To organise your photos, you categorise them by adding Tags. A photo can have multiple Tags, and you filter images by selecting the Tags you want. Adding Tags to a photograph is easy, but browsing by them is less straightforward than it is with Windows Photo Gallery and Picasa. You can also view pictures by date, but you have to change the view to do so. Windows Photo Gallery has date and Tag information on the same page, so you can quickly search your pictures using both.

Serif lets you add text comments to each image, which you can then use when you're searching for an image. The search facility is a little clunky, though, and you have to press an icon to use it. Both Picasa and Windows Photo Gallery have a permanent search bar, so you can quickly find the photos you're after.

AlbumPlus provides a selection of basic photo-editing tools that enable you to adjust the colour, contrast and brightness of an image, as well as removing red-eye. These tools aren't bad, but both Windows Photo Gallery and Picasa have the same range.

Finally, you can export your images in a number of ways, such as emailing them or creating slideshows and even calendars. AlbumPlus provides more options than Picasa and Windows Photo Gallery, but we wouldn't consider any of them essential, and they're certainly not worth £40.

The problem with Serif's AlbumPlus X2 is that it costs so much. Picasa does pretty much the same job for free and is great for anyone who doesn't have Windows Vista. Vista users should stick with the equally good Windows Photo Gallery.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple tagging
- ✗ Free tools do the same job
- ✗ Expensive

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 500MB disk space
PART CODE None
SUPPLIER www.serif.com
DETAILS www.serif.com